

TENNESSEAN OP-ED: CORPS FORGETS OWN LESSONS FROM 1975

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By U.S. Rep. Jim Cooper

(This column is the first of a three-part series.)

We don't know what will be in the Army Corps of Engineers' "after action" report on the 2010 Flood, but we can start comparing the Corps' performance this year with their actions in 1975, during Nashville's last big flood.

So how did the Corps do in 2010 compared to 1975, given the record rains? The 1975 flood crested at 47.64 feet, took nine lives and resulted in \$17 million in damages (about \$70 million in today's dollars). The 2010 Flood crested at 51.86 feet, took 31 lives, and will probably cost \$2 billion.

The following quotes are from the Corps' 1975 report:

"During the March 1975 flood, there were relatively few disruptions of normal communications (telephone, teletype and radio between the Corps, other agencies, and the public) and, in general, the reporting system functioned well." In 2010, the Corps lost Internet service on the crucial day, May 2.

"Since operations of the Corps reservoir system drastically changes the flow regime of the Cumberland River, it is necessary for the National Weather Service to be kept current on all changes of flows at the dams ... very frequent communication with the Nashville office of the NWS was required." In 2010, the Corps was many hours late in telling NWS about dam releases.

"To help control the flood crest of the Cumberland River at Nashville and further down-stream, the discharge at J. Percy Priest Dam was reduced to zero for 52 hours ..." In 2010, didn't Percy Priest continue to release water?

"Spill-way gates (at Old Hickory Dam) were carefully operated ... permitting the pool to rise slowly to the full utilization of surcharge storage." In 2010, Old Hickory Lake rose very quickly.

The (Corps) Emergency Operations Center

was established "to supply information to other governmental organizations and to direct emergency units to critical areas ... and maintained liaison with mayors and county judges in flood-affected areas." In 2010, local officials and even Corps headquarters felt deprived of information about the flood.

"About 100,000 sand-bags were issued by Corps personnel, and Corps pumps were made available to several communities in Middle Tennessee ... Corps field personnel were directly involved in evaluating people from flooded homes, laying sandbags, and operating pumps for dewatering." In 2010, what happened?

Worse scenario predicted

In fairness, regarding Nashville's flood future, the Corps warned:

"A flood of similar or even greater magnitude than that of March 1975 could occur at any time ... no matter how large a flood may have occurred on any given stream, a larger one will eventually occur.

"The Corps advises people not to build homes in those areas subject to flooding.

"In those areas where the ground is near the level of the highest flood recorded, the Corps urges developers to build a little higher, knowing that eventually there will be flooding greater than the flood of record."

There has been and should be "an increasingly massive program of developing and providing flood-plain information to the public."

Everyone knows that we had record rain in 2010, but does the rain explain the dif-fer-ences from 1975? The best parts of the Corps report were the sections warning us about the future, but few people ever saw the report.

They warned, but they whispered. The worst part is that the Corps itself does not seem to have learned the lessons of the past.

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